OPINION

BY RAFIA ZAKARIA

Men and laws

THE age of laws is, perhaps, over. As someone put it, 'When you don't know what to do, you can always pass a law; it doesn't cost much and it's very satisfying. Whether it actually works is another matter.' This observation could not be more accurate. I say this as a woman and a lawyer who has always had faith in the legal system's power to deliver justice. At its heart lies the premise that citizenship involves faith in the law to deliver outcomes that restore people — in this case, women — to the wholeness taken away from them when they became victims of injustice.

This is no longer the case. Everywhere one looks, legal systems are being hollowed out. In terms of legal theory, the political has taken precedence over the legal and the just. It is not the first time: post-World War II, when new countries, including Pakistan, were just carved out, we were at a similar juncture. At the heart of Hitler's campaign was the idea of a super-powered executive and the so-called power of the exception. Consolidation of power was the central tenet, and in this sense, the law became secondary to the political.

This is happening again. There are huge implications for women in particular — in Pakistan and elsewhere. Women have relied on legal systems over the decades because in many parts of the world, they have been pushed out of politics. Historically, they have been allotted the private realm, which, owing to patriarchal interventions, has been designated as being beyond politics. The reality is to the contrary; what happens in that space is political and determined by those whose lives and gender are considered worthy.

There are several examples of the consequences and of the inability of existing legal systems to respond to the unrelenting crisis of abuse by males. For instance, headlines in the West proclaim possible links between American President Donald Trump and child sexual abuser Jeffrey Epstein, who ran prostitution rings which included underage girls, apparently for powerful men to rape. One Epstein victim died by suicide. Trump has denied any knowledge of Epstein's sex trafficking rings but continues to dither on releasing Epstein-related files.

In her book *Living With Men: Reflections on the Pelicot Trial*, French philosopher Manon Garcia writes about witnessing a trial in which more than 50 men were tried and convicted for assaulting Gis le Pelicot while she was unconscious. Her husband would drug her and arrange for men to rape her. Manon Garcia writes effectively on the limitations of the legal system in addressing male violence. At one point, she wonders how women anywhere can ever trust men when it can be so easy for a man to find 50 males, within a short distance, eager to assault an unconscious woman and then go on with their lives. Even the process of getting justice — in a public trial — is re-victimisation as men turn up to watch the proceedings, arguably, more interested in the lurid details than in seeing justice being done.

The laws against rape, against such utter depravity, exist, and the legal system grinds away. But many men — from lawyers to judges — see an opportunity for theatrics, for more public sexism, for re-entrenching, reiterating, and republicising the worst stereotypes of women as creatures available for men's manipulation, enjoyment and ownership. 'We can still do this and get away with it' appears to be the masculine code.

Public trials of this nature, though perhaps less publicised, happen all over the world, including in Pakistan. They reveal the limits of the law, which is unable to dismantle the crude voyeuristic realities. In a world where the political has all but vanquished the legal, women will have to wrangle for and wield political power to ensure even the most basic protections for themselves. The specificities of the law, its ability to grant the individual female petitioner anything at all, stand in question in systems where the consolidation of power in the hands of individuals is shaping the future.

> Legal systems are unable to respond to abuse by males.

It is a dismal thought, especially if one has believed in the supremacy of the law. But the age of laws, it seems, is over. If legal systems enshrine procedure and rely on a deliberative process to produce outcomes that are non-arbitrary and constrained by precedent, the political is uncertain, wild and even feral given its close relationship with coercion and violence. The world in which the political reigns supreme is a harsh one — more Hobbesian and guided by the evolutionary ethic of survival of the most powerful. This world will be even harsher for women, who will now have to fight in public realms for fundamental rights and to protect their lives. ■

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BY AIZAZ AHMAD CHAUDHRY

Global chessboard

THE global chessboard has become ever more complex. The rules and norms of interstate conduct framed in 1945 are no longer being applied. The world is in transition. Some contours of the evolving order are becoming visible. It will no longer be a unipolar world. Multiple power centres have emerged, each asserting its presence in its own way, some by military muscle, others by economic coercion or outreach. The most disturbing trend is of major powers using force unilaterally, blatantly, and with no regard for international law.

The second disturbing trend is the growing culture of hyper nationalism, which is producing populist leaders, who then become a force of division and polarisation. The net outcome is unashamed aggression, xenophobia, sanctions, tariff wars, export bans, and anti-globalism. The uncertainties of the global chessboard are being compounded by AI-assisted lethal technologies, cyber warfare, and disinformation.

Ironically, the process to dismantle the prevailing world order is being led by the country that was its chief architect, the United States. It started in 2003, when the US decided to invade Iraq, establishing two dangerous precedents: a strong country can unilaterally decide to attack another country and can do so pre-emptively. Ever since, Moscow unilaterally decided to aggress against Ukraine, and New Delhi against Pakistan. Israel, with the support of the US, has broken every conceivable international law to bomb and bleed Palestinians in Gaza. For vulnerable states, the breakdown of the world order has now emerged as a serious challenge.

Where, then, is the world headed? It appears that while the prevailing world order continues to erode, several centres of power are emerging, each trying to carve out its own area of influence. A kind of club of big players. If this trend is the harbinger of what is to come, then the world would become an even more chaotic place, particularly for small and medium-sized countries. It would be useful to get a sense of the contours of the new world order by looking into four theatres of contestation on this global chessboard: Europe, Palestine, East Asia, and South Asia.

Russia had invaded Ukraine to prevent the latter from joining Nato. Some justified the Russian attack on the grounds that the West had violated its commitment of not expanding the ambit of Nato eastwards. Others believe that a larger country invading a smaller neighbour has set a perilous precedent that must not be condoned. As the war lingers on, lives are being lost on both sides, more so in Ukraine, whose citizens have been displaced in the millions. Russians are also suffering because of the harsh economic sanctions by the West. Everyone is losing out, the biggest casualty being international law and order.

Israel has been unleashing lethal firepower to break the resolve of the Palestinians living in Gaza and the West Bank. With the US at its back, Benjamin Netanyahu has made no secret of his plans to create a 'Greater Israel' by annexing Gaza, the West Bank, and then expanding Israeli borders to several territories of the Arab world. For now, the Gaza peace plan brokered by the US has checked his ambition, but he is unlikely to halt his pursuit of establishing Israeli hegemony in the region, even as he now stands charged for war crimes and crimes against humanity.

The major power competition between the US and China is affecting nearly every region in the world, but nowhere is the rivalry more pronounced than in East Asia, particularly the South China Sea. The East Asian nations are struggling to avoid choosing a side in this difficult balancing act. Although the recent 'G-2' meeting between Donald Trump and Xi Jinping in South Korea was a step in the right direction, the region will likely remain unsettled.

> Several centres of power are emerging.

India, under Narendra Modi's leadership, has aggressed against Pakistan at least thrice in the past nine years. To its embarrassment, India has learned that Pakistan has the capacity to not only defend itself but also inflict huge damage on the aggressor. The Indian leadership has vowed to resume its military Operation Sindoor. Meanwhile, India is relying on a sub-conventional and proxy war against Pakistan through Afghanistan. There is a chatter that India might attack Pakistan simultaneously from the south and across the Line of Control. That would be a huge mistake as the Pakistani nation, especially its armed forces, are confident that they can blunt any new Indian aggression.

For all aggressor states, there are lessons to learn. They will be the ultimate losers on the chaotic global chessboard they are trying to establish. A more prudent course would be to respect globalism and international law — that should be the only way to live and let live. ■

The writer is a former foreign secretary of Pakistan and chairman of Sanober Institute.

FROM THE PAST PAGES OF DAWN

1975 | Fifty years ago

4th amendment passed

ISLAMABAD: The National Assembly passed the Constitution (Fourth Amendment) Bill tonight [Nov 14] by 102 votes, which was more than two-thirds majority required for a constitutional amendment. The passage without a negative vote came after a two-day debate and a winding up speech by the Prime Minister ... Mr Zulfikar Ali Bhutto.

The Bill … provided for among other things: (1) Division of the first schedule of the Constitution into two parts.… (2) Reservation of six seats in the [NA] for minority communities. (3) Inclusion of a maximum of two days for which the [NA] may be adjourned in a week in the definition of working days. (4) Increase in the number of reserved seats for minority communities in the Punjab Provincial Assembly from three to five. (5) Clarification of the scope of Article 199, which relates to the jurisdiction of High Courts. (6) Representation of the minority communities in the existing [NA] and Provincial Assemblies… . The Opposition was not present when voting on the Bill took place. [Meanwhile, PM Bhutto] urged the Opposition to ... reciprocate the Government's spirit of accommodation. — News agencies

1950 | Seventy-five years ago

Chinese suzerainty

KALIMPONG: First hand reports reaching authoritative circles here today [Nov 14] said that peace once again reigned over Tibet and that Lhasa, was "calm and quiet". China and Tibet have agreed on peace terms, 24 hours after publication in Lake Success of Tibet's appeal for United Nations aid. A spokesman of the Bharati Government confirmed that a tentative agreement had been reached … whereby Tibet recognised Chinese suzerainty and China assumed responsibility for Tibet's external relations and communications.

The Tibetan National Assembly ... had earlier voted for acceptance of the Chinese proposals "in the interests of peace ... of Tibet and the safety and sanctity of the Dalai Lama and Panchen Lama". Under this agreement — which will have to be formally ratified by Tibet's National Assembly and the Chinese Government — China will station a "token force" in Lhasa... . A part … is already reported to have arrived… .

China had claimed sovereignty over Tibet under a treaty signed in 1720 after China had helped Tibet during some internal troubles. She had exercised no direct control since Chinese officials and garrisons were driven out of the country in 1912. — News agencies

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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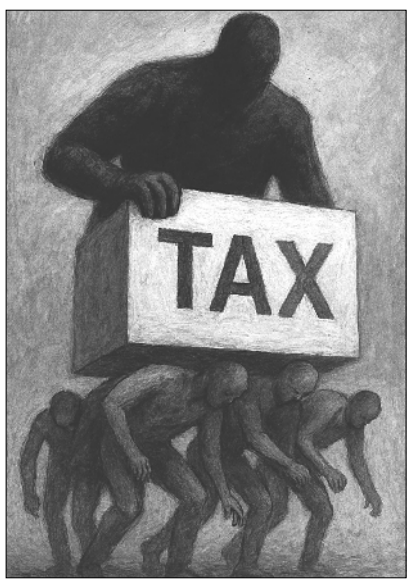
Letters may be edited for purposes of clarity and space. All letters should carry the writer's address, CNIC and phone numbers.



Fair tax is the only practical remedy

THE tax regime in Pakistan seems to have evolved into a patchwork of quick fixes rather than a coherent system that has been designed for fairness, growth and long-term stability. The state keeps collecting more from those already burdened, while the vast informal sector continues operating with near-complete impunity. This imbalance distorts the economy, discourages investment, and erodes trust between the government and taxpayers. Yet, year after year, policymakers take the easiest route, raising rates on the visible minority in the hope that numbers on paper will somehow compensate for structural weaknesses.

The most visible casualty of this flawed approach is the salaried class. Unlike traders, retailers, contractors and informal businesses, salaried individuals have documented income with built-in at-source deductions. Instead of leveraging this transparency to build a stable and progressive taxation model, successive governments have treated this group as a captive extraction point. Today, Pakistan's salaried employees face some of the highest effective tax rates in the region, bolstered by surcharges and the quiet dismantling of exemptions that once balanced the load. In an economy crushed by inflation and currency depreciation, the current policy is neither rational nor sustainable.

Corporate entities also face a similar burden, particularly through withholding regimes that treat companies as default revenue collectors for the state. Instead of incentivising investment, expansion or productivity, the system forces businesses into a web of compliance requirements that grow more complex every year. The system is not merely inefficient; it actively damages growth. Companies often have to spend more time resolving tax issues, reconciling mismatched records, and navigating contradictory regulations than focusing on innovation or scaling up their operations. The outcome is precisely what the numbers show through declining competitiveness, shrinking margins, and a rising trend of skilled professionals and entrepreneurs leaving the country in search of predictability.

The annual reports that are issued by the Federal Board of Revenue (FBR) themselves reveal how deeply skewed the system has become. A disproportionate share of revenue comes from indirect taxes, petroleum levies, utility surcharges, and withholding deductions. These forms of taxation generate money quickly, but they choke consumers, inflate production costs, and punish those who cannot shift the burden onto someone else. Meanwhile, sales tax registration remains dismally low compared to the number of active taxpayers. The difference reflects a fundamental failure to document large sectors of the economy that operate outside formal regulation, but exert massive influence on national output.

What makes the situation worse is the repeated political insistence on celebrating superficial improvements. Slight increases in revenue collection are treated as victories even when they result from raising tax rates on the same limited group rather than broadening the net. A country cannot just tax its way out of structural decay by targeting only the compliant segment of society.

Real reform requires abandoning the comfort of old habits. The government must confront the informal sector through stable documentation mechanisms driven by technology. Digital payment systems, integrated data platforms, and automated audits are some of the steps that need to be taken. Tax slabs must be adjusted for inflation, and protections for the salaried class must be restored in order to prevent further erosion of disposable income in the country. The national economy cannot grow while its taxation system punishes compliance, rewards concealment, and relies on a narrowing base.

Gulab Umid
Turbat

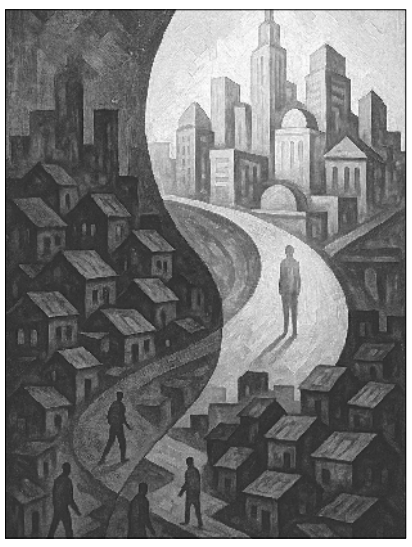
Miraculous progress

THE progress China has been able to make in a matter of just 35 years is undoubtedly miraculous. I recently visited China for two weeks on a learning tour with a large group. The last time I had been to Beijing was in the 1990s for a few days. The differences I witnessed this time are mindboggling. The country has grown exponentially on the simple principle of the rule of the law regardless of any bias, including lawmakers, bureaucrats and the men and women in uniform.

Merit is considered supreme and it is followed everywhere religiously. Reward and punishment are part of every walk of life. It seems as if no one is poor in China anymore because I did not find any beggars on the roads of the four cities that I visited.

Millions of tourists visit China every year and boost the local economy. They feel safe as the crime rate is negligible. There is zero tolerance for corruption. Honesty and trustworthiness are the motto of the whole nation. One can only hope that Pakistan would someday learn these lessons from its best friend.

Serajuddaula Syed
Karachi



A tale of 'two' cities

RECENTLY, around 6pm, I left the Defence Housing Authority (DHA) area in Karachi to go to a distant locality. Anyone who drives in Karachi knows this is just about the worst possible time — Sharea Faisal jammed end to end, Korangi Road crawling, and Jam Sadiq Bridge suffocating in gridlock. But the Malir Expressway was different: smooth, wide and strangely empty. For a moment, it felt like another Karachi. And that, perhaps, is the problem. The tale of Karachi is, indeed, a tale of two cities existing within a single city.

The salaried class and daily wage-earners slog home using clogged arteries — exhausted, crammed into buses, or stuck in traffic jams on motorbikes. Their commute devours hours of life every day. Meanwhile, the elite class glides along a glittering shortcut carved through Malir, built almost exclusively for their convenience. The contrast is stark. The expressway does not solve Karachi's traffic problem; it merely shifts comfort from the many to the few.

Worse, it is environmentally reckless. Cutting through the Malir River's course, the expressway narrows the bed, and replaces farmland with concrete. Experts have been warning of intensified flooding in future monsoons, but nature continues to be treated as an element disposable. Which, by the way, it is not.

Driving under the bright LED lights that line the expressway, another irony struck me: across the walls in Shah Faisal Colony, entire neighbourhoods sat in darkness amid power outages. The road had light; the people had none. Could there be a sharper metaphor for misplaced priorities?

Instead of uniting, the Malir Expressway deepens the divide. Karachi deserves better: buses, circular railway, safer roads, water and power for the majority, etc. Building for the few while ignoring the many is not at all progress; it is fracture.

Haseeb Dal
Mirpurkhas

Unfair SBP move

CUSTOMER protection guidelines of the State Bank of Pakistan (SBP) for all commercial banks are generally found to be commendable. However, item 2.5.1 of Business Conduct & Fair Treatment Framework, recently released under BPRD Circular No. 04 of 2025, has shocked small depositors across the country. Now, under the cited regulatory framework, depositors with average monthly balance of less than Rs50,000 will be charged a certain fee by the banks for providing the 12-month bank statement ending June 30 that is required by most individuals for finalising their income tax returns.

This development is nothing but SBP's approval of banks' plan to jack up their income by levying a charge on their small depositors. This guideline is an act of unfair treatment. Small depositors will have to pay charges for obtaining their account statements, while big depositors will continue to have the same free of charge.

Does the SBP officialdom assume that small depositors are not required to file tax returns when the income above Rs600,000 per annum (or Rs50,000 per month) is taxable? Individuals earning Rs50,000, or, for that matter, even Rs200,000 per month cannot afford to maintain a balance of Rs50,000 in their bank accounts. However, they have to submit their tax returns. Similarly, senior citizens having their lifetime savings invested in different government schemes draw every penny of their monthly profit to keep their lives moving. They, too, cannot maintain the required balance, but still have to submit tax returns.

The SBP should review the framework, and advise all commercial banks to provide Tax Year (July-June) statements free of charge to their account holders irrespective of their monthly average bank balance.

M. Shams Izhar
Karachi

▶ **E-CHALLAN DISPARITY:** Karachi faces multiple challenges, such as pathetic roads, poor drainage, broken traffic signals and faded lane markings. Drivers often commit unintentional violations because of the poor road infrastructure. Before penalising citizens through exorbitant e-challans, the government should first provide safe and properly maintained roads. Instead of discrimination in fines, there should be equal standards and better road development policies across all major cities. A fair system is one that enforces law and ensures the basic rights of the people. The authorities concerned should review the e-challan policy, bring uniformity across provinces, and take immediate action for the repair and maintenance of Karachi's roads.
Nafisa Younus
Karachi

▶ **PRIVACY BREACH:** A video recently went viral on social media platforms showing private moments of a couple captured through an e-challan camera. The incident sparked outrage over data protection, ethics and misuse of surveillance footage. In Pakistan, where comprehensive data protection laws are still in their infancy, misuse of such videos is highly likely. Footage must be strictly restricted to official use, safely stored and viewed by only authorised personnel. As much as e-challan system contributes to good traffic discipline, it raises concerns of breach of data privacy. There is a need to adopt strict mechanisms to avoid the issue.
Anshara Zakir
Karachi

▶ **HEALTHCARE CRISIS:** Government health facilities in Gujrat are overcrowded and under-equipped, and often lack essential medicines. Shortages of qualified doctors, nurses and paramedics leave thousands of patients untreated each month. There is an alarming increase in hepatitis, typhoid and dengue fever cases. Maternal and child health indicators also remain weak. The absence of modern diagnostic equipment forces patients to travel to Lahore or Islamabad for proper treatment. Without immediate intervention, Gujrat's health crisis could worsen.
M. Daud Hamza
Gujrat

External Ombudsman

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